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Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2024

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Music Technology (8MT0)
Paper 2

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AS Music Technology Component 2: 8MT0/02
Technology-based Composition: Examiners report, 2024

Submissions for 2024 produced a range of technologically musical responses with marks ranging from 10-60 with most candidates appearing between the 21-44 region.

This year saw a continued improvement in candidates use of synthesis and sampling techniques for musical purposes. There were fewer examples of candidates using a plethora of synthesis and sampling techniques and sounding them at unmusical points in the piece. Instead, there were more considered uses of, and placements of, a variety of synthesis and sampling techniques that served and created a musical purpose within the work.

The unfortunate habit of candidates cutting their compositions off at the 2:30 time limit was not as frequent this year, but was still evident in a few submissions. What has appeared this year though, is candidates not taking care when bouncing out/rendering their finished work properly because many musical decays were simply cut short. This not only affected the mix but the flow of the work.

The provision of the samples as part of the task ensured excellent scaffolding for the composing process. Sample 1 was taken from Labi Siffre's 1975 song 'I got the'. This provided a range of pitches in octaves which candidates successfully pitch-mapped to create new musical lines. Some candidates produced some very creative ideas from the tremolando string slide too. Sample 2 provided candidates with a DJ scratch of the 'Sonic Boom' phrase from the 1990's videogame 'Street Fighter 2'. Some candidates were very creative with this, and it was manipulated to create rhythmical ideas, pitched ideas, and textural ideas too. The idea of ending or starting their work with delay on Sample 2 was a common one. Also, many candidates created their entire piece as an homage to either 'Street Fighter 2', or 90's video games in general, with many candidates who chose to use 8-bit style synthesis along with this, often scoring well for synthesis too.

There has been a tendency over the last couple of years for candidates to not consider the structure of their work. Teachers are asked to not neglect the simple aspects of composing and place an emphasis on having a clear and suitable structure at the start of the composing process. When sections change, the music within the section needs to change with it so that each section is musically, and sonically, identifiable. Having sections that contrast, and that are then ordered in a certain way, helps the music have a sense of direction, momentum, and therefore a clear sense of climax somewhere within the piece.

Administration

The administration, on the whole, was excellent this year, and it is clear that teachers are more comfortable and/or familiar with using the 'Learner Work Portal'. All minor administrative errors were dealt with incredibly promptly and professionally by teachers, so my thanks to them.

Assessment Grid 1: Synthesis

At the lower-end of the cohort, candidates used minimal synthesis timbres in their work. When they were included, they tended to be pre-set timbres with minimal/no editing. They also appeared as sporadic, fragmented token gestures, rather than being features of the work. Higher-end candidates used a good range of synthesis techniques and created most of the timbres themselves using subtractive soft-synths. These techniques were then used in musical ways to add tension, create dynamic and/or timbral build, or for rhythmical/melodic purposes. Common techniques used were:

Oscillators octaves apart and blended, sometimes with some subtle de-tuning; filtering using a LPF with some cut-off movement; attention to long/short attack and decay/sustain settings were used. Envelope Generators on Filters were popular at the higher end as were creative uses of LFO's. Stylistically appropriate synthesis techniques in styles such as EDM and Drum 'n' Bass, were clearly researched in some work, which not only showed a clear demonstration of synthesis knowledge, but also demonstrated stylistic awareness and application. Candidates who tried to fit in as many synthesis techniques as possible without employing them in a musical fashion only scored a maximum of 4 marks in this area due to the misjudgment of their musical use.

Assessment Grid 2: Sampling

Candidates were assessed on their sampling techniques here, not only on the provided samples, but also on any other samples that they have included themselves. Examiners were assessing techniques commonly found on both traditional hardware samplers and software samplers. Lower-end candidates had explored minimal sampling techniques. Typically, sample 1 was cut-up and re-triggered, perhaps with some small tokens of pitch mapping. Sample 2 tended to simply be looped with the odd kick and snare cut out and re-triggered. Higher-end candidates explored a variety of sampling techniques, mostly from the supplied samples, and included some or all of the following: Cutting up; re-triggering; stuttering; pitch mapping; filtering (commonly LPF) sometimes with variable resonance and automated; stretching; reversing; pitch bending.

As with synthesis, candidates who tried to fit in as many sampling techniques as possible without employing them in a musical fashion only scored a maximum of 4 marks in this area due to the misjudgment of their musical use.

Candidates scored particularly high when they transformed the samples beyond their original musical state. For example, using melodyne or pitch-mapping to manipulate the pitches and rhythms of the supplied vocal sample to create a new melodic/harmonic idea. Some candidates used their own samples from 'crate-digging' but tended to simply loop large sections of other's work, rather than manipulate them. There is no credit for selecting a sample from somebody else's work and simply repeating it and adding a new 'beat' to it.

Assessment Grid 3: Creative FX

Any processes applied to the samples that cannot be found on a sampler were assessed here. Lower end candidates used very few creative FX and tended to limit themselves to reverb, delay and a little bit of distortion. Higher end candidates explored the plethora of creative FX a modern DAW can offer which could have included; creative and musical use of reverbs and delays; flange; phase; distortions; tremolo and chorus. Side-chaining dynamic processors were also popular, however, it yielded mixed musical results.

Candidates who chose to use as many FX as they could, tended to yield poor musical results. There was often little care for the mix clarity of the FX being used, and more importantly, on the musical purpose that the effect produced within the piece.

Assessment Grid 4: Editing of mix

A well-balanced mix with all parts clear and evenly spread across the stereo field was required, as well as care and attention to EQ, compression and reverb use for mix purposes. A suitably strong signal to noise ratio was expected without the need for extreme loudness from 'mastering' processes. Lower end candidates tended to have a confused and inconsistent balance, often with

muddy synths and uncontrolled dynamics in most parts. Higher end candidates produced carefully crafted mixes that had clearly been mixed on monitors with suitable EQ and compression decisions taken. They also contained a musical spread across the stereo field which enhanced the structure and texture of the work as and when necessary. Candidates were often cutting short reverb/delay tails again this year, as well as simply cutting off the music abruptly at 2:30 to keep within the time frame, and this was not pleasing to hear; more care should be taken when such decisions are being made.

Assessment Grid 5: Response to brief

Students were assessed on two factors here: How well they had kept to the 2:30 time of the brief and how well they had incorporated the given samples into their work. Lower end candidates tended to either sound the samples sporadically throughout the piece in an unmusical fashion or looped them, often throughout the whole piece. Higher end candidates transformed the given samples creating new musical ideas from them. Very high-attaining candidates did this several times throughout the piece. However, it is important to note that whilst some candidates did attempt to transform the samples into new musical ideas, some did not do so in a convincingly musical fashion. Some candidates tended to focus on creating new musical ideas out of just one of the samples, normally the vocal and tended to disregard the drum loop and sounding it in loop form in a small section of the song.

Some candidates this year had some success composing new vocal lines that incorporated the provided vocal sample, and this often produced musical results.

Some candidates also took a literal interpretation of the lyric “couldn’t reach the moon” and incorporated a whole theme around space travel into their work. Whilst this was fine and produced some musical results, the lyric was a metaphorical one about aiming for personal goals, and pushing yourself, rather than actually going to the moon.

Teachers are reminded that the samples are there to assess the students’ knowledge of technological techniques and how they employ these in a musical setting, as well as providing a scaffold and a starting point from which to begin their composition. They are a central part of the task and are not to be used as small gestures within a different piece.

Assessment Grid 6: Style and coherence

Examples of styles successfully worked in this year included: Drum ‘n’ Bass, EDM, Punk, Ambient, House; and fusions of all the previously mentioned. However, overall, there was a lack of emphasis on composing within a certain style, with some candidates simply composing without a clear direction of style. Lower end candidates tended to have a confused style without any real sense of drive and an over-reliance on copy and paste with no musical developments of copy-and-pasted material. Higher end candidates were composing in a variety of different pastiche styles with varying moods/atmospheres created within each composition. Pieces written in naturally repetitive styles, such as Grime and Drum ‘n’ Bass, contained constant evolution of the textures used in order to maintain interest. Higher end work also had a constant sense of drive, interest, and momentum throughout, with the 2:30 time limit feeling very short.

Teachers are reminded that composing within a style’s features provides a framework for the candidates to work within so that they can then go and develop their own sonic voice.

Assessment Grids 7-11: Musical elements

Melody, Harmony, Rhythm, Texture and Structure are all assessed for each candidate, with the highest three marks being carried forward to the composition mark total. This facilitates work in different styles to be rewarded equally. Lower-end compositions tended to be simplistic and functional in nature. There was often an over-reliance on copy-and-paste in most parts and no real attempt to sculpt contrasting textures to create a guided structure to the piece. Higher-end candidates tended to score highly in all elements and utilised a lot of different musical techniques, devices, textures, and structures to craft the composition. It is important to note that high end candidates all had a carefully crafted structure that neatly took in to account the 2:30 time limit of the task.